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SIPDIS

STATE FOR DRL/IRF AND EAP/BCLTV

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: CURRENT RELIGIOUS SITUATION - THE OFFICIAL VIEW

REF: HANOI 1698

1. (U) Summary: Officials from the Government Committee on Religious Affairs and the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy's Centers on Human Rights and Religious Studies have reiterated that Vietnamese are free to practice religion, that the GVN not only permits the practice of religion but actively supports and facilitates it, and that abuses reported in the Central and Northwest Highlands are the fault of misguided local officials and do not represent official policy. Septel provides some contrary views of some religious officials. End summary.

Committee on Religious Affairs

2. (U) In a meeting with EAP/BCLTV's Charles Jess, Charge Porter, and poloff Moeling on August 13, Chairman Ngo Yen Thi of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) explained that he had just returned from the Central Highlands, where he had found that more and more local administrations were permitting Protestant groups to operate in their areas. The local officials he met promised to try further to facilitate the normalization of religious activities in the region. He added that he believed the situation would soon be returning to "normal."

3. (U) In principle, Chairman Thi claimed, the State did not interfere with religion, but merely issued regulations to ensure "normal activities and equal treatment to avoid inequality." The CRA facilitated religious activities, and tried to "create conditions" for the operation of religious training activities. The CRA also needed to organize "protection" for places of worship, as well as repair and restore damaged churches and temples, he noted. The CRA worked with the state to promote and protect religious and human rights, although he admitted that there was the problem of local officials not "respecting" all of the regulations. Another problem was that of "untrained clergy" acting on behalf of unrecognized organizations and provoking locals to rise up against the government, such as the Dega Protestants, he claimed.

4. (U) Chairman Thi said that the Vietnamese people demand a high level of ethics and dignity from their religious and spiritual leaders, and want their leaders to look after their spiritual and material well-being. The Vietnamese would never accept a priest suspected of sexual harassment, he claimed. The state has an "obligation" to protect the people and to ensure that those who act against the state and have compromised ethical standards are punished, he stressed.

5. (U) Jess noted repeated reports of forced renunciations and occasional destruction of churches, which have prompted concern in the U.S. and may be factors in a decision to designate Vietnam as a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act. Chairman Thi admitted that the understanding of local GVN officials is not always "consistent" regarding rules and regulation of religion. Thi said that Vietnam must rely on education to change the local officials to compel them to act in accordance with the law, and was gradually making progress, something not reflected in U.S. reports. He added that the reports of forced renunciations had gone to the National Assembly, which has demanded an investigation and which will send its own delegation to examine the situation.

6. (U) Thi emphasized that religious rights and human rights should be considered in Vietnam in the broader framework of poverty reduction, health care, education, and other humanitarian concerns. As a poor country, Vietnam could not provide everything. In the SRV, the spiritual needs of the community were not merely the responsibility of the church, but also the state, he claimed.

7. (U) Charge reiterated that the perception in the U.S. is that the religious freedom situation in Vietnam is getting worse, particularly in the area of forced renunciations. These perceptions could affect the relationship negatively, in the same way as the decision on catfish and the various flag ordinances have affected Vietnam's perception of the U.S. The Charge said we appreciated the Chairman's frankness, and highlighted that the cases where local

officials did not follow the law were important ones. Where such cases occurred, the U.S. would like to see punishment; this would have a positive effect on Vietnam's image.

18. (U) Thi reiterated that forced renunciations of faith were not the policy of the central government, even noting that the GVN did not want to fall into the same mistakes of the feudal period when a Vietnamese emperor forced Catholics to renounce their religion. The SRV would not make that mistake, he pledged.

Party research centers -----

19. (U) On August 12, Jess and poloff met with the Directors General of the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy's Human Rights Research Center and Religious Studies Research Center (reftel), accompanied by the DG for the Department of International Cooperation. According to Cao Duc Thai, director of the Human Rights Research Center, there were areas of agreement and areas of difference between the U.S. and Vietnam on human rights; he preferred to focus on the areas of agreement. The center itself had been started in 1994, and had conducted some valuable training courses for prosecutors and inspectors, some with the participation of outside observers and consultants, notably from Sweden and Holland. Topics had included when to use force; the definition of self-defense; legal procedures; and the definition of excessive force. There had been lively discussions on the use of the death penalty, he added.

110. (U) Dr. Thai admitted that even his understanding of the human rights situation in Vietnam was inadequate, and with that in mind, he had recently sent senior staff specifically to check out the Central Highlands situation. Asked about his Center's perception of international criticism of Vietnam (i.e., the IRF report or the HRR), Thai responded that many U.S. politicians receive inaccurate information about Vietnam. As an example, he raised the issue of confiscation of church property. Thai claimed that the GVN had never taken any church property, although some of it was "perhaps contributed" to the State during the socialism-building period. Thai expressed a hope that more U.S. politicians would come to Vietnam to see for themselves that Vietnam was a country trying to guarantee human rights.

111. (U) Dr. Luu Dat Thuyet of the Center for Religious Studies said there were two main points on religious freedom: first, Vietnam respects religious rights; second, the purpose of religion was to "unify" the population. He quoted Ho Chi Minh's statement that "religion should be free and religious believers should unite." This doctrine, Thuyet said, was institutionalized in 1946 and added to the constitution in 1992. In his opinion, when considering a country's religious freedom record, the U.S. should evaluate the atmosphere and see how people were conducting religious activities. In Vietnam, religion is practiced openly and actively, he claimed, adding that "tens of thousands" of believers attend religious festivals. He reiterated that the CPV and GVN genuinely try to facilitate the exercise of religious rights.

112. (U) Dr. Thuyet urged that the U.S. make note of the training and appointment of religious leaders in Vietnam, about which there has been substantial progress, with six Catholic seminaries and three Buddhist universities as well as other training schools for other religions. (Note: Beginning in 2003, there is also a Protestant seminary in HCMC. end note) In addition, the GVN published many religious books and documents such as the Bible, he noted. In addition, places of worship had also been tremendously improved, with state support. Some clergy and their followers had admitted that the current environment was the best ever for practicing religion in the history of Vietnam, he claimed.

113. (U) Thuyet acknowledged that "here and there" were mistakes and wrongdoing, but these did not reflect either official policy or overall trends. These cases were anomalies and individual cases due to mistakes at low levels. Overall, he asserted that the religious situation in Vietnam has a distinctive character; while there are many religions and different belief systems, Vietnam has never had a religious conflict. Unity between believers and nonbelievers has always been a tradition.

114. (U) Comment: Septel will report some less positive views by religious practitioners. As usual, GVN and CPV officials say mostly the right things about respect for religion, but there continue to appear to be problems at least in the field. It appears that officials of the state, party, and National Assembly are beginning to take such reports more seriously, to the extent of promising investigations. We will continue to press for more such efforts -- and more feedback on what official investigations

uncover -- but are not optimistic.
PORTER